Book review: 'The Wages of Rebellion' by Chris Hedges.

Review of *The Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt, by Chris Hedges,* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2015).

Events across the West, such as the 2008 economic crisis, Brexit, terrorist attacks and the recent US Presidential election are raising huge questions about the state of what we call the West. In the midst of these events has come a widespread sense of disorientation as well as a loss of confidence in established systems of social, political and economic life. Increasing numbers of people on the left and the right are experiencing an unnerving belief that the world put together in the West since the end of W.W.2 is unraveling. Something big is afoot. In the words of one Nobel Laureate 'the times, they are a-changin'.' Citizens are unsure about what it all means. A world that used to make sense no longer does.

In North America there is a continuous analysis that seeks to make sense of what is happening. Varieties of books and articles are pouring out in the multiple attempts to provide explanations for unprecedented times. One of those books is Chris Hedges' *The Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt* (Knopf Canada, 2015). This book is a part of this growing literature calling for radical change. In reading Hedges' book it became clear that there is an undercurrent of concern about the state of the West. A conviction is growing that the issues facing the West at this moment call for something more than adjustments to the current social, economic and political order. Within that backdrop this review discusses Hedges' book but also summarizes some of these other titles that represent this recognition that something is deeply amiss about the Western project which can't be fixed with adjustments to our current systems of life. Finally, the concerns of Hedges and the authors of books mentioned raise questions as to how Christians in North America and Europe can respond to what looks increasingly like a genuinely revolutionary situation. This book review can only respond by pointing out some directions.

Chris Hedges is a respected Pulitzer Prize winning journalist. He is also an ordained minister in a US mainline Presbyterian church. His website, *truthdig.com* provides editorial comment on issues shaping the headlines. His more recent writing addresses issues of class and justice in America.[1] In his view the current, post-election state of America is a sign of the 'collapse of democratic institutions, the pillaging of the economy by elites'.[2]. Hedges' passionate critique of the American political, social and economic situation comes from someone within its intellectual elites and religious mainline.

The Wages of Rebellion pulls no punches. While written with a view toward American social movements and constitutional history its underlying assessments address all of us in the modern West. The book is shaped initially by an analysis of Western revolutionary theory from the 19th century forward. Revolutions, Hedges proposes, are not fermented by ideas promulgated by elites. They occur when intolerable gaps develop between ordinary people and the reigning narratives of the state, its economics and its elites. Such gaps of expectation and hope are driven by a sense that the state, social institutions and economics have lost touch with ordinary people and their common good. For Hedges this 'gap between what people want, and

indeed expect, and what they get – is being played out in the United States and the many states of Europe during a new age of mounting scarcity, declining wages, joblessness, government imposed "austerity" measures and assaults on civil liberties' (5). As the expectations of a better future recede for more and more people across the West (e.g. shrinking middle classes, jobless or part-time minimum wage economies, austerity) there is a growing loss of faith in the primary narratives undergirding Western social, political and economic life. With this situation comes a weakening of the capacities or will of elites to provide leadership. The cumulative result is a growing undercurrent of rage, confusion, and frustration roiling just under the surface, waiting to be catalyzed into revolution.

For Hedges these conditions now exist across the West. The hope that we'll, somehow, get through it all with a new fix misses what is happening. In Hedges' analysis what is occurring is no longer amenable to adjustment. As the basis of people's hope keeps being hollowed out, existing social, political and economic structures can collapse at a dizzying speed. This sense of collapse is now happening, but it's not primarily at the level of rational, abstract analysis. Rather, what is occurring is that the emotional experiences and convictions of people are changing as witnessed in events like Brexit or the US election. When this happens the soil is ripe for revolution. Revolutions are about emotions not primarily new ideas. As has been said revolutions come about when people feel that established power structures no longer serve the common good. The language Hedges uses here is drawn from the American social theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr who used the term *sublime madness* to describe a force which gathers inside people who 'disregard immediate appearances' and, with 'nothing but madness will do battle with malignant power and "spiritual wickedness in high places"' (211). What was prescient about Niebuhr's own evaluation was his recognition that traditional liberalism (which has made a come-back in Canada in its last national election) is a 'useless force in moments of extremity' (211).

Hedges' argument is both radical and a clear-sighted account of what is happening in the West. He recognizes that revolutions are not predictable but is convinced that conditions in NA are making some kind of revolt inevitable. The potential for revolutionary movements grows. This is what is being recognized and written about by a growing chorus of thinkers across the West. What makes Hedges' book important is that it doesn't stand alone. What follows is a sampling of recent books from my 'read' bookshelf.

Micah White, *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution,* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

Micah White, a key leader of the *Occupy Movement* in the US, has recently written *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016). He argues that existing movements of protest have run their course. They are no longer effective means of engaging the state or capitalist economies. The book assesses the failures of the Occupy movement. It offers a re-reading of the nature of revolutions and a prescription for how to move forward with needed social transformations across Western societies. His conviction that revolution is needed remains clear:

The failure of our efforts reveals a truth that will hasten the next revolution: the assumptions underlying contemporary protest are false. Change won't happen through the old models of

activism. Western democracies will not be swayed by public spectacles and mass media frenzy…the limitation was not in the particular tactic but rather in our concept of protest, or our theory of social change, which determined the overall script. Occupy revealed that activists need to revolutionize their approach to revolution (27).

Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must? - Europe's Crisis and America's Economic Future,* (Nation Books, 2016).

In the wake of the European Community's economic crisis, focused recently on Greece, the economist and former Greek minister of finance Yanis Varoufakis wrote *The Global Minotaur* (Zed Books, 2011) and his more recent *And the Weak Suffer What They Must? - Europe's Crisis and America's Economic Future*. Varoufakis argues for a fundamental revisioning of the economic power structures which have shaped the West since the 1944 Bretton Woods agreements and their post 70s reformulations. A subtext of these books is the conviction that the organized powers of capitalism and state power are the twin factors requiring fundamental revolution.[3]

Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future,* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

In the UK *Guardian* and *New Statesman* journalist, Paul Mason's book *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) argues that a good deal of the eroding confidence of citizens across the West is caused by the continuing economic failure of the established capitalist system. Tectonic shifts in economic and social life are already afoot with almost no public discourse on what is happening or how it is affecting the lives of citizens. Established markers are being erased before the emergence of an uncertain new world.

Deric Shannon (editor), *The End of the World as We Know It? – Crisis, Resistance, and the Age of Austerity,* (AK Press, 2014).

Mason's perspective is reinforced by Deric Shannon, editor of *The End of the World as We Know It? – Crisis, Resistance, and the Age of Austerity* (AK Press, 2014). Shannon's introductory essay summarizes the times in which we live:

By now, dozens – if not hundreds – of competing narratives that outline how we arrived at this particular global moment, are circulating, typified by multiple crises (economic, social, ecological, political, etc.), multiple contestations over the means of life, the multiple possibilities for the future, some certainly more pleasant than others (1).

Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World,* (Polity, 2016).

Even as eminent a European sociologist as the late Ulrich Beck, in his posthumous book *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Polity, 2016), sees a state of crisis across the West that has created a situation in which we are 'totally confused because what was unthinkable is possible and real today on account of the metamorphosis of the world' (17). In the dissolution of the established, once taken-for-granted socio-political frameworks of the West, he sees the need for fundamentally new beginnings. Like these other books, Beck's tone is about crisis and

revolution. He is clear - seeking to address the challenges confronting the West based in the existing socio-cultural-political-economic frameworks dooms us to repeat existing patterns. His notion of metamorphosis isn't far from the calls for revolution expressed by many others.

J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy,* (NY: Harper, 2016); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land,* (NY: New Press, 2016).

The list of books describing the crises and transformations shaping North America grows apace. In the light of the American elections *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Strangers in Their Own Land* both point to the widening class and economic fissures across America. They describe a state in which the so called elites guiding the country have lost touch with the common good and with what is happening to people on the ground. They have lost their vocation. There is a profound lack of understanding about what is shaping this age of anxiety.

A recent *New York Times* article (*The American Dream. Quantified at Last* by David Leonhardt)[4], illustrates just how out of reach (out of touch?) is the vaunted myth of the American Dream. The conviction that most people will flourish in this land, a land where life gets better, richer and fuller, has receded into a faint light down an increasingly dark tunnel. Leonhardt describes:

...an economy that disappoints a huge number of people who have heard that they live in a country where life gets better, only to experience something quite different…Their frustration helps explain not only this year's disturbing presidential campaign but also America's growing distrust of every major societal institution, including the federal government, corporate America, labor unions, the news media and organized religion.

That the West is unraveling can't be denied. The nature of this unraveling and ways of responding are altogether different questions. Writers like Hedges and others raise issues that challenge our assumed worlds. The tragedy is that most churches and their leaders still choose to avoid this unraveling. From a North American perspective it's disturbing to see how the euro-tribal churches remain focused on fixing themselves rather than listening to where the Spirit is at work in these upheavals. It has been difficult reading Hedges while receiving Tweets and FB posts inviting me to conferences on how to get more young adults into church or how to make churches more family friendly.

Readers need to assess for themselves whether, in Europe and North America, we're in a situation where a majority of citizens are losing faith in the underlying political, economic and social narratives that have shaped the modern West. If this is the case the chances of fixing are slim. We should expect mass movements of civil disobedience (as in Brexit or the US presidential elections) driven from the bottom and the edges. Such movements, on the surface, make no rational sense to existing elites. They seem, from the perspective of elites, to go against the very desires people are expressing. But this is to miss the point. As such movements of disobedience grow they become messier and more liminal. The direction of society is lost to controlling elites but within this unraveling emerge clues to a hopeful future.

I would have liked Hedges to engage more fully the question of Christian life in the midst of this

crisis. Toward the end of the book he offers hints. He references Jacque Ellul's *The Presence of the Kingdom,* (Seabury Press, 1948) written right after W.W.2. It remains a prophetic text of Christian imagination in a modern project that has lost its capacities to frame the lives of its citizens. Its chapter 'Revolutionary Christianity', on both the need for and the nature of revolution, is a must read for our moment.

[1] See Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt,* (Toronto: Knopf, 2012).

[2] Chris Hedges 'Waiting for the Barbarians' *truthdig.com,* November 27, 2016 http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/waiting_for_the_barbarians_201611271 (Last accessed 3rd January 2017).

[3] For one reading of this challenge see Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power,* (Little, Brown and Company, 2015)

[4] David Leonhardt, 'The American Dream. Quantified at Last' *New York Times*, 11th December 2016, Sunday Review 2.